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ABSTRACT

Intended for employers, supervisors, and coworkers, the booklet presents guidelines for accommodating learning disabled (LD) employees. An introductory section explains the condition, describing its nature and the range of impairments it includes. Five types of learning disabilities are identified: visual, auditory, motor, tactile, and academic. The importance of careful job placement is stressed. Types of accommodations are reviewed, including use of verbal instructions for persons with dyslexia, of short, simple sentences for persons with auditory perceptual problems, and the use of additional training time for people with both auditory and visual perceptual problems. Examples of restructuring jobs to accommodate employes are offered. Suggestions for interaction include being patient and flexible and finding a quiet place for communication. A final section addresses ways a supervisor can help. Supervisors are urged to be direct and specific, to help LD employees understand the hidden rules of the organization, to treat the disability matter-of-factly, and to use common sense. (CL)

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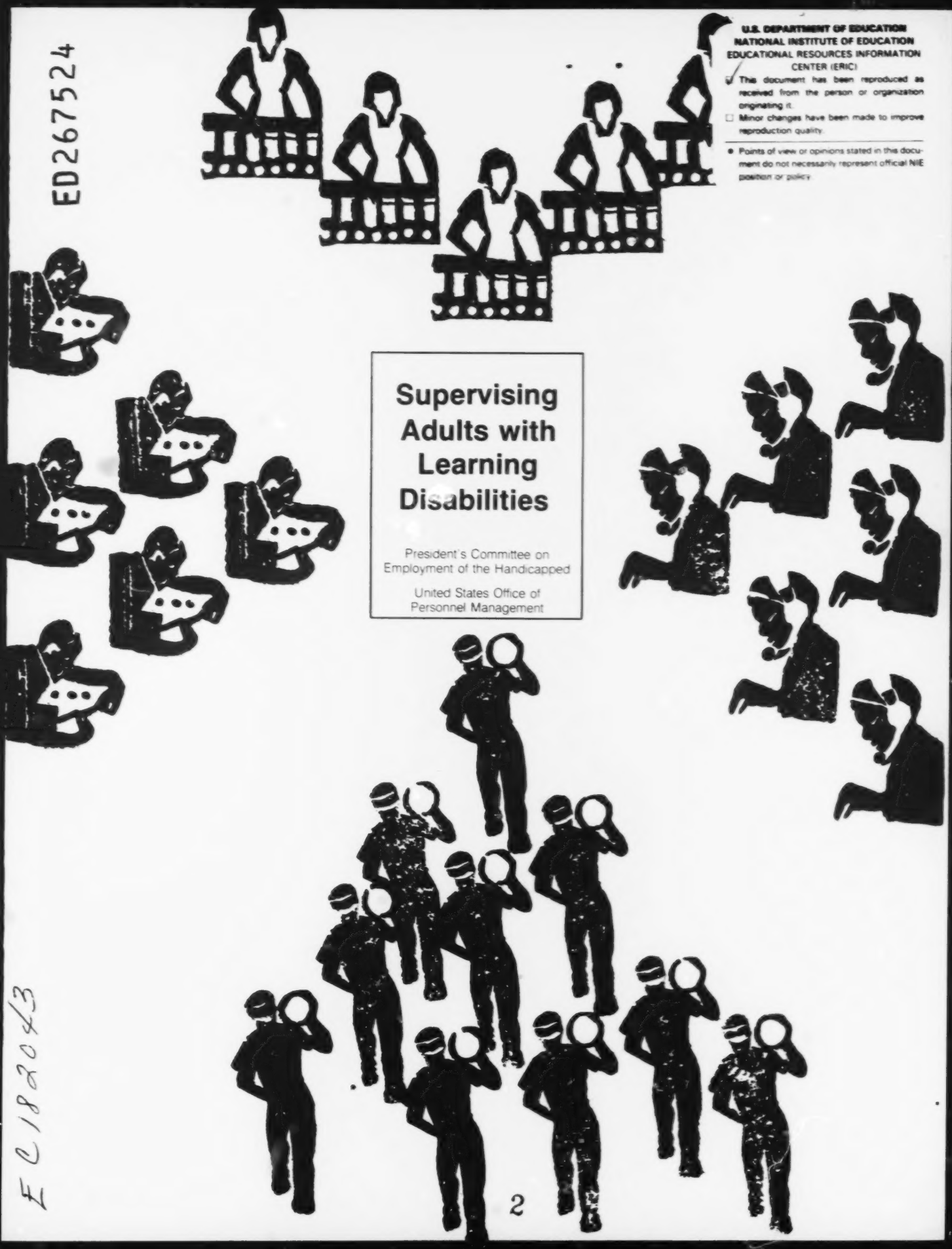

Supervising Adults with Learning Disabilities

President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped

United States Office of Personnel Management

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Preface

Learning disabled people, although often talented, capable, and intelligent, sometimes may present an enigma to supervisors. Nevertheless, more employers are becoming aware of the talents and limitations of learning disabled employees and are finding that minor job accommodations can often make the difference between an effective employee and a frustrated one. The question that many supervisors ask is, "what accommodation is necessary?" The purpose of this publication is to provide guidance which will help to answer these questions. It is designed as a supplement to the "Handbook of Selective Placement of Persons with Physical and Mental Handicaps in Federal Civil Service Employment."

This publication was written by Ms. Dale Brown of the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped. Ms. Hedwig Oswald and Ms. Anice Nelson of the Office of Personnel Management edited the publication. Also, advice was sought from experts in the field of learning disabilities, and thanks are offered to the following persons who reviewed and made suggestions for its content:

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Barbara Scheiber and Louise Hullinger are parents of learning disabled children. Paul Perencevic teaches learning disabled people in a vocational education program. Frank King is an authority in this field of special education.

It is hoped this document will help employers, supervisors, and coworkers to better understand the disability and to find ways to work successfully with employees who have learning disabilities.

Learning Disabilities

Until recently the invisible handicap of specific learning disabilities was thought to be a problem that children outgrow. Now, however, with new research about adults who have been diagnosed as learning disabled, this disability is recognized as an impairment that may affect an individual's ability to find or keep a job and to advance to a level commensurate with his or her abilities.

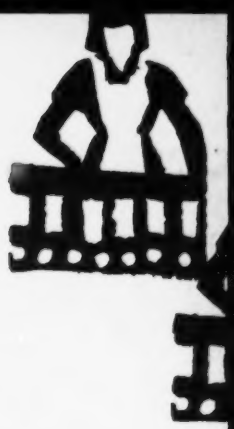
The term "specific learning disabilities" encompasses a variety of neurological problems which have an impact on how a person organizes the visual, auditory, or other sensory information he or she receives from the environment and, consequently, affects how the person performs. In other words, learning disabled people receive inaccurate information through their senses. Like static on the radio, or a bad TV picture, the material gets garbled as it travels from the eye, ear, skin, or muscle to the brain. This inaccurate sensory and/or perceptual information can present problems for both the learning disabled employee and his or her supervisor.

According to the most widely used definition of learning disabilities, (as stated in Public Law 94-142, The Education for All the Handicapped Children Act), a learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in using spoken or written language in the presence of normal or above-average intelligence. The disorder may manifest itself in problems related to listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing mathematical calculations.

A learning disability is not mental retardation or an emotional disorder. These handicapping conditions are different. Retarded people have difficulty using their minds for complex thinking and figuring. Learning disabled people, on the other hand, have difficulty receiving information through their senses.

It's not always clear that a person has learning disabilities. When they initially hear about learning disabilities, many supervisors may think about their employees who have productivity problems and become aware, for the first time, of the possibility of undiagnosed perceptual difficulties. Learning disabled employees whose handicaps are not recognized are often thought to be unmotivated or to have emotional problems. With the line between learning disabled and normal so unclear, incidence figures vary. It is thought by experts, however, that about three percent of the population has learning disabilities.

There are many types of learning disabilities, and they vary from mild to severe. Each person is affected differently. Some learning disabled people have adapted to their limitations, through classes, counseling sessions, or through life itself. Many can compensate for their problems so well that they are barely noticeable. Usually, they have found a voca-



tion in their area of strength. Other employees with learning disabilities will need extra help from their supervisors or coworkers in order to contribute productively. Often they have exceptional talents, but without accommodations they may not be able to effectively demonstrate these abilities.

The following guidance provides a description of the major types of learning disabilities, their possible impact on performing job tasks, and suggestions on how to accommodate to the disability in the work environment. There are many kinds of learning disabilities, and some people may experience difficulty in more than one of the sensory processing areas.

Types of Learning Disabilities

1. Visual - People with visual perceptual problems have trouble receiving and/or processing accurate information from their sense of sight. They might have difficulty picking out an object from a background of other objects (visual figure-ground). A person with this problem may have difficulty locating a certain type of nail in a jar of other nails or finding specific information from lists or text. Some learning disabled people have difficulty in visual discrimination, that is, in telling the difference between two similar things, such as a snow tire and a regular tire. This would also have an impact on reading since two similar letters, e.g., "u" and "v," might look alike to the person. Another visual problem is sequencing or difficulty in seeing things in correct order, such as cans lined up on a shelf or numbers and letters on a page. This visual sequencing disturbance could interfere with a person's ability to read and to perform computations.

2. Auditory - Auditory perceptual problems refer to difficulty in receiving accurate information from the sense of hearing. These problems are analogous to those in seeing. Auditory figure-ground problems refer to difficulty in hearing one sound over a background noise. Individuals with this problem would experience difficulty hearing the supervisor when a noisy machine is turned on. Auditory discrimination problems refer to the difficulty in hearing the difference between two similar sounds, such as "nineteen" and "ninety." An additional problem might be auditory sequencing or difficulty hearing sounds in the correct order. A person with this problem might hear "club" instead of "bulk" or "street" instead of "treats." People with auditory perceptual problems may experience difficulty understanding and remembering oral instructions.

3. Motor - Some people have problems working with their hands. Their brains have difficulty telling their bodies what to do. This is called a perceptual motor problem. This may result in clumsiness, difficulty in participating in sports, and awkward or stiff movements.

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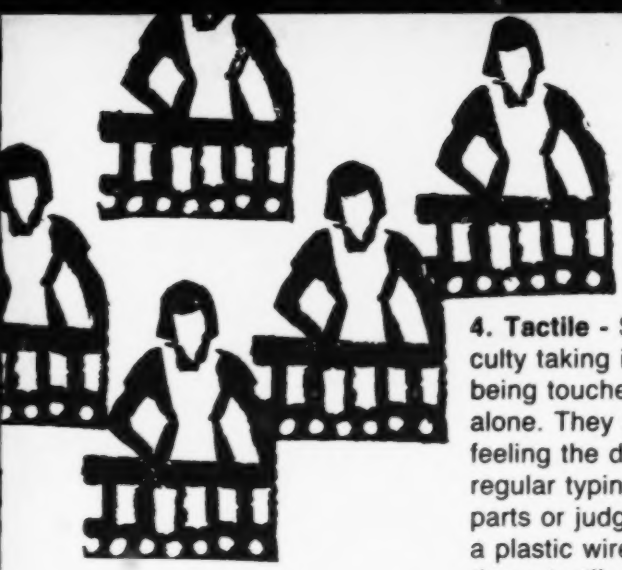


4. Tactile - Some people have tactile perceptual problems, that is, difficulty taking information in through the sense of touch. They may not like being touched by other people, even in fun, and may prefer to work alone. They also may have tactile discrimination problems or difficulty feeling the difference between two similar objects, such as bond and regular typing paper. This employee may have trouble assembling small parts or judging the right amount of pressure needed to bend and twist a plastic wire without breaking it. Of course, in jobs that do not require these tactile distinctions, this clumsiness will not matter very much.

5. Academic - Dyslexia, which refers to severe difficulties in learning to read, is one of the best known learning disabilities. People with severe dyslexia are those who have never received remediation, may not read at all, or may read with great difficulty. One dyslexic lawyer dictates all of his work and uses a tape recorder instead of taking notes. On the other hand, some dyslexic people have been able to train themselves to read fairly well. Other learning disabilities classified by academic difficulties include: "dysgraphia," inability to write, and "dyscalculia," inability to do mathematics.

Job Placement

A strong match between the person's strengtns and the work to be performed is particularly important to the learning disabled individual. A careful job analysis is essential. Selective placement personnel and rehabilitation counselors can be very helpful to candidates by assisting them in assessing their strengths and finding jobs that utilize their strong points.

Most learning disabled people should not do tasks in which their disabilities would play too large a role. It is important to stress this, because the handicap is invisible and not obvious to the casual observer. For example, people with perceptual motor problems could have difficulty working on a car engine or laying bricks or building bookshelves from wood. People with a tendency to transpose digits due to visual sequencing problems should not be data entry operators where lines of numbers must be accurately copied. Persons with auditory perceptual problems should not work as telephone switchboard operators where they spend their day taking messages. On the other hand, many learning disabled people can do well provided they are working in their area of strength or have received remedial assistance and have overcome their disabilities. A person with visual perceptual problems, for example, might be a good telephone operator, provided either the switchboard is not too complex or he or she receives detailed training. Some people with perceptual motor problems learn to compensate well enough to do specific jobs requiring those skills. It may be

necessary to analyze the task more thoroughly and to give a little extra help, but the result will be a proud and reliable employee in almost every case.

The confusion between learning disabled and mentally retarded people can lead to bad matches between people and jobs. Many successful retarded people have stronger perceptual motor abilities than most learning disabled people. So unskilled work such as dishwashing, office cleaning, and photocopying, which many retarded people do well, could lead to failure for the learning disabled adult with a perceptual motor problem.

What jobs can lead to success for learning disabled people? Any job can be good! Many of them go into positions that require creativity, because their "incorrect" perception provides a slightly different way of looking at the world; thus what they produce can be exciting, amusing, and innovative. Those who can't read well often take jobs where reading isn't important. They may become salespeople, mechanics, or enter professional fields. Generally, learning disabled persons find successful employment in the same occupations held by the general population.

Types of Accommodations

As with all of your employees you should be building on the employee's strengths. Each individual with learning disabilities will require different accommodations depending on the nature of the learning problem and its severity. Here are a few guidelines:

- Many employees with *perceptual problems* have difficulties with accuracy, such as reversing numbers and placing words in wrong spaces on a form. Therefore, people with this difficulty may need their material checked for grammar and word or number reversal.
- Individuals with *reading problems* (dyslexia) often "read" printed matter by listening to tapes. They might prefer verbal instructions. It may be helpful if someone takes the responsibility for letting them know about important shop or interoffice written communications. Dyslexic employees might prefer to make phone calls instead of writing letters. For those people who read slowly, extra time should be allowed.
- People with *auditory perceptual problems* often need to work in quiet surroundings. Many learning disabled people will ask you to repeat or clarify directions and would appreciate either receiving a written copy of your instructions or having the opportunity to repeat them back to you. It helps if you use short simple sentences and enunciate clearly. These individuals often take notes to help them remember. It is helpful to demonstrate exactly what needs to be done, rather than merely describing the task.

- People with *visual perceptual problems* may have difficulty finding objects. They may lose things frequently. This may mean letting them duplicate important documents or even having spare tools or books available. In order to keep track of materials, they may require neat and well-organized surroundings. They may also color code files and keep items on shelves or bulletin boards, rather than in drawers where they can't see them.

- Most people who have both *auditory and visual perceptual problems* need to use both of their senses together in order to learn a task. They may require additional time to train. For the most part, they will need the types of accommodations needed by people with auditory and visual perceptual problems. They may have already made satisfactory accommodations on their own.

As with any other employee, watch the learning disabled person do the task correctly, leave time for questions, and assure them that they can check with you if they have problems.

Some learning disabled adults will not observe the passage of time in a normal way. They may get so absorbed in their work that they are not aware of what time it is. Reading a clock may be hard for them. These problems may also make it difficult for them to come to work at a specific time. If getting to work on time is necessary in your unit, that must be explained clearly, since he or she may have to overcompensate by coming in early! Otherwise, flextime is a reasonable accommodation for this problem.

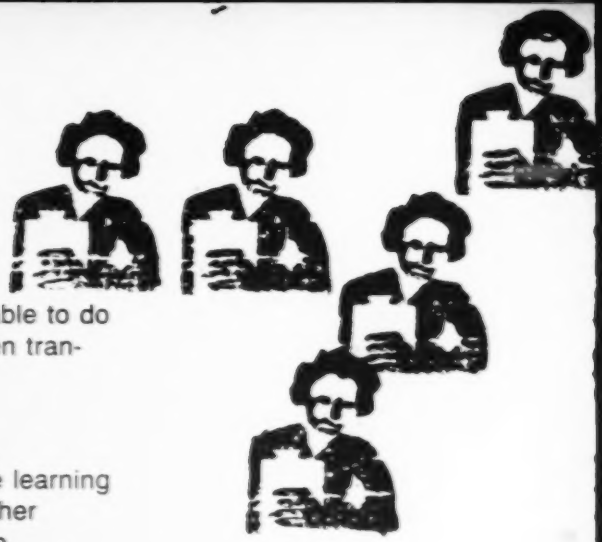
Some jobs may involve tasks which the individual is unable to perform. Perhaps these tasks can be reassigned to other employees or eliminated, if they are not essential functions of the job. Such job restructuring can be very profitable to your operation.

Some examples:

(1) A manufacturing methods engineer was responsible for locating new equipment for aircraft assembly lines. Because she had difficulty reading and writing specifications and justifications, she was given very few assignments requiring extensive writing. Instead she kept track of machine performance and statistics. This involved use of numbers, a skill in which she was strong.

(2) A salesman with dyscalculia (inability to do math) convinced the customer to buy the product, then took the customer and the item to a checker who wrote up the sales slip and used the cash register.

(3) A secretary with auditory perceptual problems was excused from answering the phone and from taking messages. Instead of performing these tasks, she did additional typing and also supervised the filing operations.



(4) A counselor was great at helping his clients but was unable to do the paperwork. He dictated the work on tapes which were then transcribed by clerical support staff.

Hints for Interaction

Basically, you will find the skills required for supervising the learning disabled person are the same skills needed for supervising other employees except for the need for occasional extra assistance.

(1) If your employee has auditory perceptual problems, try to find a quiet place to communicate away from noisy machines. Speak clearly in a normal tone of voice. It may be necessary to repeat the instructions and to segment them, that is to divide each sentence into short sections and to pause between sections. If the employee has difficulty understanding something, it may be appropriate to repeat the instructions in simpler vocabulary.

(2) Find out how the employee wants to receive information. Does he or she want it orally? In writing? Both? If your employee doesn't know, try various options.

(3) Keep the work area safe. Hazards such as boxes in the middle of the floor or holes in the rug are especially difficult for people with visual perceptual problems.

(4) Be patient. Hurrying creates more errors and problems.

(5) Be flexible. Be open minded to new ways of doing things providing the productivity of other workers is not overly affected.

(6) An occasional word of praise is important to everyone. Encouragement is particularly vital when they are learning something new.

(7) Some learning disabled people may have problems in adjusting socially.

They may have difficulty fitting in and getting along with others. This may be because their perceptual problems give them incomplete information about others and thus they may not interpret body language correctly. For example, if they can't see the small movement a person makes when he or she wants to interrupt them, they may persist in talking. They may be unable to distinguish between a polite, strained smile, and a happy smile.

Some learning disabled people are too energetic (hyperactive); they move too much or walk around a lot. Of course, for some jobs this can be an asset. However, they might also have nervous habits such as tapping pencils, chewing gum, or playing with their keys. They may not understand how these behaviors affect their coworkers.

People with auditory perceptual handicaps might not be able to tell the difference between a joking and questioning tone of voice. Or they may tend to take everything literally. They work so hard to understand the words of a statement that they may ignore the underlying meaning.

How can supervisors help such a person?

(1) Be direct and specific. Say exactly what you mean. Get important points across without sarcasm or "hints."

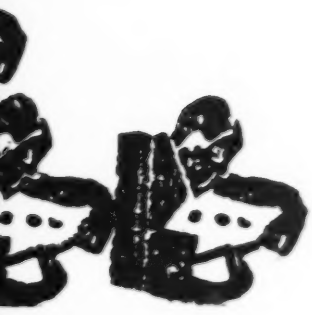
(2) Help your learning disabled employee understand the hidden rules in your organization. Don't just expect this person to "pick them up." Explain inappropriate behavior and help him or her to overcome it. Examples: Some people with depth perception problems don't know how far away to stand from another person. One learning disabled college graduate consistently stood or sat too close to other employees while talking to them. This bothered many staff members. Her supervisor suggested she stand farther away. It's important to tell the employee what behavior is making others uncomfortable and what changes you expect.

Another learning disabled worker was very intelligent and wanted to learn about his department. He persistently asked the other employees many questions and made suggestions on how they could do a better job. His coworkers felt his questions and advice were inappropriate. The rules of turf and territory had to be explained to him. He learned it was okay to make suggestions that directly related to his job, but that the entire department was the responsibility of the division director.

(3) Be understanding of his or her problem, but be firm about any limits you set. Disabled people want to be treated normally.

(4) Be especially thorough in your orientation of this employee. Go over every work rule. Make sure that the person understands all of the components of a successful work day.

Treat the disability matter-of-factly and use your common sense. A learning disabled person can be a productive team member!



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